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ABSTRACT

Nineteen families participated in a telephone survey concerning how schools can better serve students with behavioral needs, including students with behavior disorders, attention deficit disorders, hyperactivity, learning disabilities, mental disabilities, and pervasive developmental disorders. This report summarizes parent comments, with excerpts on the following concerns: effect of behavior problems on the child's education; the effectiveness of the school; behavior problems outside of school; sources of family support outside of school; effects of children with behavioral needs on family life; support received and needed from schools; dreams parents have for their children; and suggestions for schools and communities (e.g., schools are urged to train teachers in behavior management techniques and communities need to make accommodations in recreational programs). Appendices provide graphs showing participant characteristics as well as the family survey questionnaire. (DB)

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Iowa Behavioral Initiative

How Can Schools Better Serve Students With Behavioral Needs?

What Families Have To Say

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A Survey Report Conducted by
Mountain Plains Regional Resource Center
for the Iowa Department of Education

June 30, 1993

EC 303263

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Iowa Behavioral Initiative

How Can Schools Better Serve Students With Behavioral Needs?

What Families Have To Say

A Survey Report
Prepared by
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June 30, 1993

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

How Can Schools Better Serve Students With Behavioral Needs?
What Families Have To Say 1
- Effect on Education 1
- School Effectiveness 2
- Behavior Problems Outside of School 3
- Outside Support 4
- Family Life 4
- Support From School 5
- Dreams For the Future 6
- Schools 6
- Communities 7

Appendix A A-1

Student Gender and School Enrollment

Appendix B B-1

Medical and Educational Labels of Children Surveyed

Appendix C C-1

Schools Attended by Children of Families Surveyed

Appendix D D-1

Iowa Behavioral Initiative Family Survey

IOWA BEHAVIORAL INITIATIVE

How Can Schools Better Serve Students With Behavioral Needs?

What Families Have To Say

Nineteen families participated in a telephone survey as part of the Iowa Behavioral Initiative. The purpose of the survey is to gain insight on the family perspective of "How can schools better serve students with behavioral needs?"

The parents, stepparents, and foster parents surveyed have children with special behavioral needs; most have been identified as students in need of special education services. They spoke to us about the behavior and needs of a total of 22 children. Programming for these children range from general education classrooms to residential programs, with the majority of the children being served in resource rooms combined with general classroom integration. One-third of the children are in regular classrooms full-time with a wide variation in the amount and quality of accommodations made for them during class or after the school day. Over one-third of the students are identified as having behavior disorders. Approximately one-fourth of the students are affected by Attention Deficit Disorder or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. Other labels include Learning Disability, Mental Disability, and Pervasive Developmental Disorder. Many of the children have more than one of these labels.

Effect on Education

He's suspended frequently for his behaviors, so he doesn't get a lot of education.

Parents almost universally identify the behaviors that interfere with their child's education as problems with:

- Limited attention spans
- Difficulty completing work
- Disruptive behavior in the classroom

Many parents of children with ADHD said their children function well in structured classrooms with consistent routines, but exhibit behavioral difficulties during unstructured time: between classes, during lunch, and at recess.

Generally, parents with children identified as having BD used words like "belligerent" and "defiant" to describe their child's attitude at school. Their disruptive behaviors often result in suspension.

Low self-esteem resulting from their children's behavioral and learning problems at school was a common concern.

School Effectiveness

> *I will spend a lot of time at school persisting to get more help and support.*
>
> *If we hadn't fought for him and struggled out of love for this child... they would have just let him slip through the cracks and become a drop out... But we didn't give up.*

Those who feel the school is helping their child cite the following areas:

- Increased self-esteem
- Better learning skills and improved academic performance
- Improved behavior
- Improved social skills and more success making friends

Parents who feel the school is not helping their child describe the following insufficiencies:

- Unwillingness to make accommodations for their child
- Unsupportive of parents' efforts to devise special programming for their child
- Poor and inconsistent communication with parents

According to parents, teacher strategies vary widely. Some teachers try to employ special learning techniques in the general classroom for students who need alternatives. Parents list the following strategies and accommodations used by classroom teachers:

- More hands-on activities
- Oral examinations
- Repetition of instructions
- Increased one-on-one communication
- Daily communication with parents through phone calls or notes home describing the students academic and behavioral progress
- Allowing more movement in the classroom for students who have difficulty staying in their seats for long periods of time

Parents also spoke of systems of rewards and consequences for acceptable and unacceptable behavior, counseling with school psychologists and social workers, one-on-one peer counseling, programs such as "Smooth Sailing," and good communication between the resource room teachers and their regular classroom teacher.

Parents who feel their school is effectively helping their child repeatedly describe the consistent communication between teachers and parents. Communication on a daily basis via phone calls or notes from teachers makes parents feel they are in an active partnership with the school to meet their child's needs. According to parents, children are making progress in special education programs or general education classrooms when teachers adjust curriculum and provide learning alternatives. The parents of these children are generally pleased and offer few suggestions for improvement.

Behavior Problems Outside of School

While several of the children's behavior problems at school are not present at home, most parents describe their child's behavior outside of school as being similar to and, in some cases, worse than in the classroom.

Parents frequently spoke of their children as being "mouthy," "aggressive," and, again, "defiant." This is especially true of the students labeled BD. Children with ADHD, too, are described as having inappropriate emotional outbursts with many oppositional behaviors.

Poor peer relations is another aspect of behavior problems parents often mentioned. This includes inappropriate peer choices, being too easily influenced by peers, and an inability to relate well with their peers, often as a result of immaturity.

Outside Support

The three most common sources of support families identify outside of school are:

- Family and/or individual counseling
- Medical treatment
- Parent support groups

Almost all of the parents have tried professional counseling or are currently using counseling to help with their children's problems. Some families use private psychologists, while others use community social service agencies.

Parents stress the importance of a medical or educational diagnosis of their child's special needs which validates their family's experience. Medical interventions which include effective medications, have been extremely helpful, especially for children with ADD and ADHD.

Parent support groups such as Tough Love, Parents Anonymous, adoption support groups, and informal parental support groups give parents places where they can share their experiences and receive moral support from other parents. Parents feel these groups make a difference in their lives.

Family Life

> *[Our son's problems] certainly take some adjustments. It requires a lot of our energy to support him on doing his homework... He just needs lots of supervision... We have to be more supportive to help him focus on tasks. He doesn't end up with the same chores other kids would have. He's not the kind you would ask to mow the lawn.*

Children with behavioral needs affect family life in many different ways. Parents report the most prevalent aspects of home-life disruption are:

- Disruptive behaviors
- Curtailed family activities
- Strain on family relationships

Parents describe many kinds of disruptive behaviors at home, including physical and emotional outbursts. Many parents say that their child with behavioral problems is often violent and abusive towards siblings. There are problems with breaking things, acting out for attention, and, in one case, inappropriate sexual behaviors.

Disruptive behaviors require family adjustments. Parents mentioned over and over again the children's need for constant supervision and problems finding competent and appropriate child care. This need for continual supervision restricts parents' mobility and creates limits on certain kinds of family activities. Demands are particularly difficult for single-parent families. Two-parent families spoke of the complex arrangements they have to make to spend any time alone with their spouse to rest and relax.

Generally, if a child has negative behaviors at home that require a lot of energy and time to modify, it affects the entire family. Parents describe the difficulty of trying to maintain a balance between the often consuming special behavior needs of one child and the needs of other members of the family.

Support From School

> *We have been through six facilities in the last three years. This is the first place that's actually worked. . . It's a locked facility.*

Parents have divergent ideas and opinions regarding the role and involvement of school in helping children and their families cope with their behavioral needs. Quite a few parents feel very satisfied with the strategies the school has for managing their children's behavior and designing effective educational programs. Others, especially those with children in residential treatment centers, feel public schools have been completely ineffective.

Parents offered their suggestions on how the school could better serve their children's needs:

- Increase accommodations for their children's needs in the regular classroom
- Devise a more team-oriented approach–including administration, students, parents, teachers and counselors
- Increase communication between school and parents
- Improve coordination between resource room teachers and regular teachers
- Educate teachers on special behavioral needs

- Provide teacher training to work with students with special needs
- Provide parental training in such areas as behavior modification
- Offer more counseling programs and counselors
- Increase teacher monitoring of students' progress
- More intervention at school with inappropriate behaviors
- Implement after-school extra-curricular activities designed for students with special needs

Dreams For the Future

> *I wish the community had more summer-type programs [for special needs children].*

The dreams parents express for their children are hopeful, but realistic. They want their children to be able to live independently, pursue careers and jobs that make them happy, and be satisfied with the lives they are able to make for themselves.

Most parents want their children to graduate from high school and a few expressed the hope of college. Some parents have more modest hopes. They want their children to learn to manage their behavior, have emotional balance in their lives, become less frequently overwhelmed by problems and increase their self-esteem.

When asked how schools and communities could help make their dreams for their children happen, parents offered the following suggestions:

Schools

- Train teachers in behavior management techniques
- Increase teacher awareness of students' special behavioral needs
- Increase school resources to meet student needs
- Offer more career exploration programs
- Make counseling available during the school day to work on behavior management
- Teach family living/functional living skills at school
- Provide more structure in the academic setting
- Institute more formal programs for increasing social aptitude

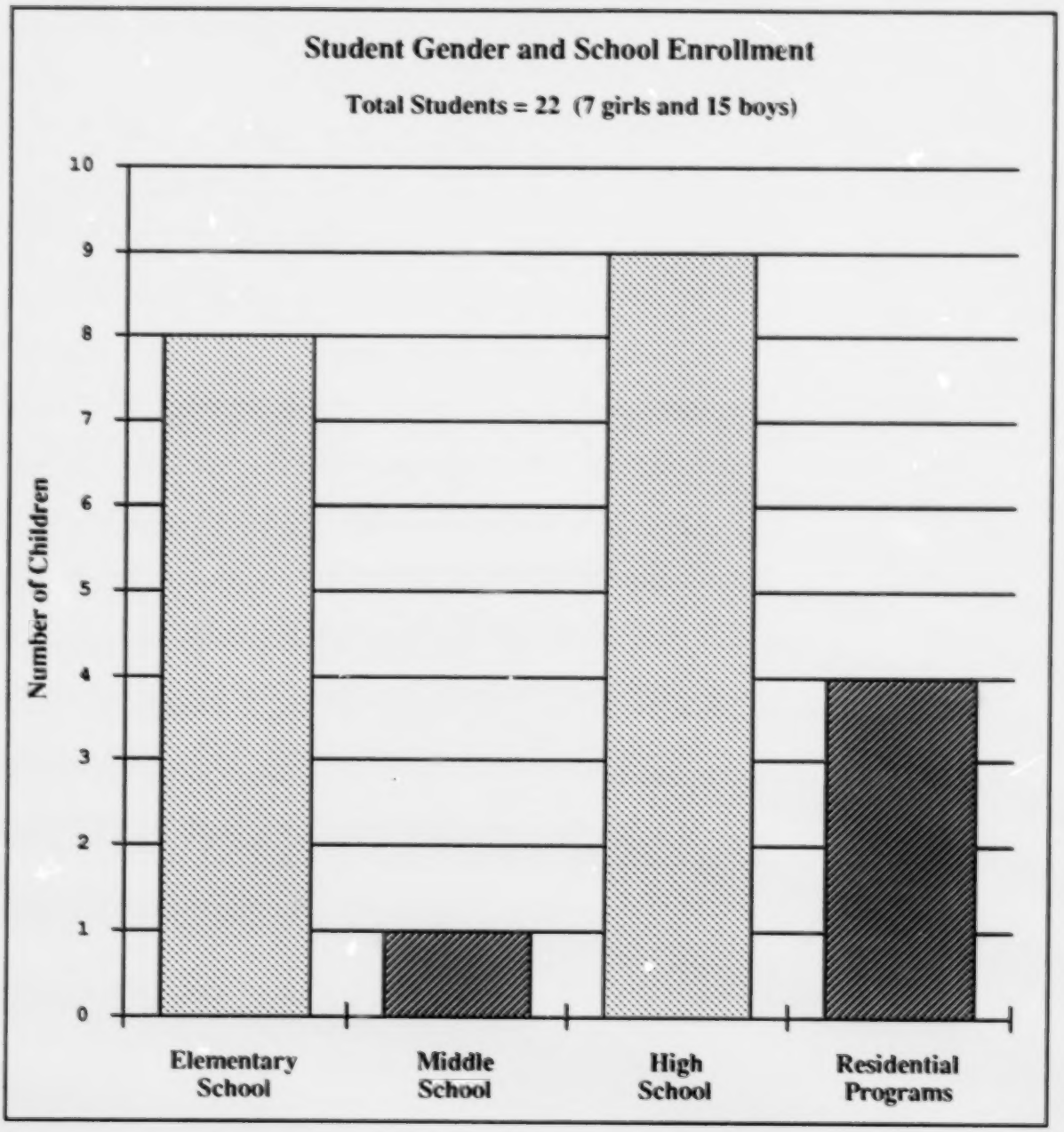
- Provide more options for alternative learning situations like cooperative learning
- Offer flexible options and programs tailored for each student's needs
- Devise ways to keep kids in school
- Decrease suspensions for inappropriate behavior; work on learning appropriate behaviors at school
- Create an alternative school which combines academic and living skills learning

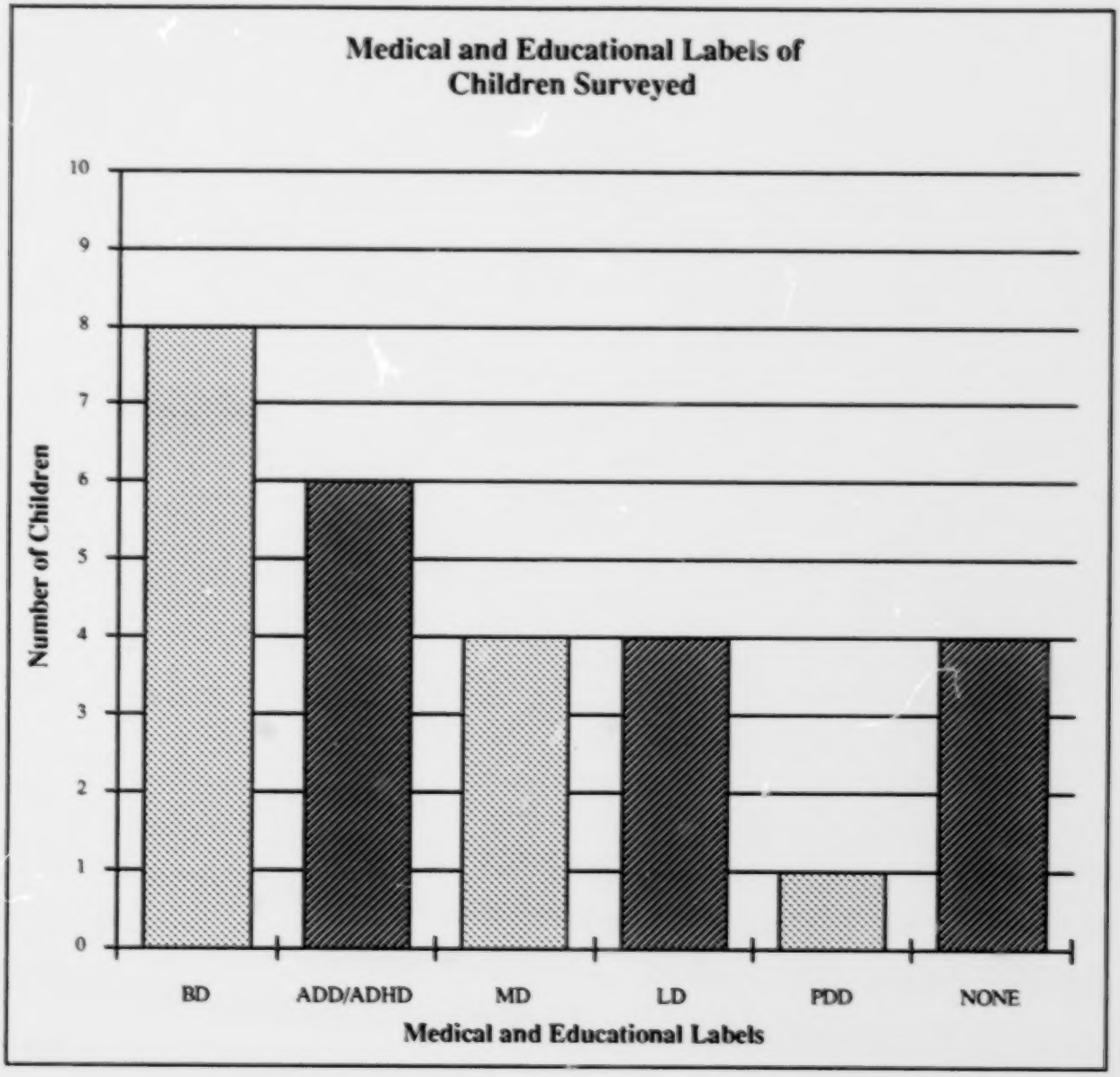
Communities

- Make accommodation in community recreational programs
- Educate community on children with special needs
- Increase availability of counseling services for children with special needs
- Provide training programs for child care workers
- Make child care services available for families with children who have special needs
- Create programs in business community to hire teens with special behavioral needs
- Develop community programs to help integrate these children with their peer group

Additionally, parents say they need more access to affordable family services and access to statistics on different schools' retention rates for these students. Some also feel that there is not enough done to make parents aware of the availability of existing programs in the community.

Appendices


Student Gender and School Enrollment
Total Students = 22 (7 girls and 15 boys)
Number of Children
10
9
8
7
6
5
4
3
2
1
0
Elementary School
Middle School
High School
Residential Programs


Medical and Educational Labels of
Children Surveyed
Number of Children
10
9
8
7
6
5
4
3
2
1
0
BD
ADD/ADHD
MD
LD
PDD
NONE
Medical and Educational Labels

Schools Attended by Children of Families Surveyed

School/City

BLC (Beaman, Conrad, and Liscomb) School District, Beaman

Butler Elementary, Fort Dodge

Centre Community High School, Sioux Center

East High School, Sioux City

Eisenhower Elementary, Dubuque

Forest City Community School, Forest City

Grebill Academy, Sioux City

Jessup Community School, Jessup

Johnston High School, Johnston

Malcolm Price Laboratory School, Cedar Falls

May Goodrell, Des Moines

Mitchell Elementary, Des Moines

Orchard Place, Des Moines

Perkins Elementary, Des Moines

Roosevelt High School, Des Moines

Saydel High School, Saydel

Urbandale High School, Urbandale

Valley High School, West Des Moines

Washington High School, Cherokee

IOWA BEHAVIORAL INITIATIVE
FAMILY SURVEY

Name _____ # _____

Relationship to student _____

Student's age/grade _____ identification/diagnosis _____
not diagnosed _____

Student's school _____

Type of classroom/program _____

Length of time in program _____

Did you attend your child's last parent-teacher conference? ____Yes ____No

Did you attend your child's last IEP meeting? ____Yes ____No _____NA

1. How does your child's behavior affect his or her education?

2. How has school helped your child with behavior problems?

3. What kinds of behavior problems does your child have outside the school?

____

4. Who helps your family work with your child on problems that arise outside the school?

5. How does your child's behavior at home affect or disrupt family life?

6. How could the school help your family in coping with your child's behavior?

7. Describe your dream for your child's future.

8. How could the school help make that happen?

____

9. How could the community help make that happen?

10. If your child is in a special program, how is it making a difference?